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*First language attrition by speakers  
of Bulgarian in Israel\**

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"Minority languages should be thought of as natural resources, which can either be squandered or protected. Like endangered species, languages under threat can die, unless they are protected." (Suzanne Romaine)

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

We like to start with some background characteristics of our respondents. There was no shortage of subjects, quite willing to be recorded for the sample, which is an indication of the generally positive attitude. The subjects of our survey are the carriers of the Bulgarian language who brought it into contact with the Hebrew language spoken in Israel.

For the purposes of the research we have subdivided the sample into three groups: 1. The first generation, who have used and maintained the language in relative isolation for fifty years; 2. The second generation, who have not learned it consciously, but were exposed to Bulgarian inside the family and in the community and acquired Hebrew and Bulgarian in coordination; and 3. The third generation, for whom Bulgarian is almost lost (moribund). [It should be mentioned, however, that for the second and third generation Bulgarian is being revived (though rather sporadically) through the renewed cultural and economic ties with the country of origin, where Bulgarian is spoken by eight million people, as well as by the new wave of immigration, which has brought in Israel 3 200 speakers of Modern Bulgarian.]

Before we started recording the interviews, we hypothesized that plenty of code-switching and code-mixing would be taking place during the discourse. So, naturally, we started interviewing the first generation speakers, preparing to track down and analyze some code-switching types and code-mixing mechanisms, such as "GATING" (that is the site where the switching takes place), some syntactic and semantic constraints etc. Much to our disappointment most of the first generation speakers maintained a steady flow of Bulgarian speech for hours, rarely "switching" or "mixing".

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It has been reported that in a lot of countries bilinguals would hide their knowledge of a minority language, due to lack of prestige and scornful attitudes. In sharp contrast to this, our first generation speakers obviously **took pride** in speaking "good" Bulgarian and made a conscious effort to recall and use only Bulgarian words during the recordings. On the other hand, the second generation speakers, as if to compensate, "switched" and mixed profusely.

### EXTERNAL FACTORS

There are three basic factors of importance to the maintenance of an LI language in a foreign environment — a) institutional support, b) status; and c) demographic concentration. In our case, the demographic concentration seems to have sealed the fate of the language. Though an interplay of several historic factors and coincidences, a huge number of people was transferred 'en masse' and concentrated into a small area. There are a few small Bulgarian communities (in the United States, in Canada, in Australia and perhaps in other places), but nowhere in the world is there such a unique concentration as one in Israel. The first trickle of Jewish immigration from Bulgaria started at the turn of the century, but the big wave arrived in 1948—49, when almost the whole Jewish community moved to its homeland. This coming coincided with the Liberation War and the newly arrived families moved into the houses of the fleeing Arab population in the city of Jaffa (or Jafo). Forty two thousand people came and only five thousand remained in Bulgaria. At that time that made over seven per cent of the sixhundred thousand strong population of the newly founded State of Israel.

There is plenty of evidence that the language of the community, resettled in Jafo, was quite powerful and remained homogeneous and in relative isolation until the early seventies. It was isolated from the country of origin (Bulgaria) for political reasons and from the other Jewish communities because of the lack of Yiddish (Jews from Bulgaria are Sephardic and speak Ladino). The second type of isolation was the reason why for the very few marriages, where the sides are from different origin (or linguistically mixed) among the first generation. What is more, in the few cases of mixed marriages, the husbands or wives, respectively, were motivated highly enough to learn spoken Bulgarian. And they did that under no pressure or obligation — it was their own choice. We recorded two cases: a husband of Romanian background and a wife of Yemenite origin, who spoke with amazing fluency and correctness and were even familiar with Bulgarian folklore.

We know that education in L2 is destructive to LI. Well, the first generation did not get many opportunities for formal education. Many of them reached some kind of communicative skills for professional contacts in L2 but never mastered it thoroughly. There are distinguishable phonetic features in the Hebrew of Bulgarian speakers, especially the proverbial "hard (L)" phoneme, which gives them away. Further evidence is that a great number of the first generation don't read for pleasure in Hebrew. At that time, the density and concentration in Jafo provided comfort and contributed to the lack of motivation — for example, in Jafo still there are two newspapers in Bulgarian, shop signs were in Bulgarian, several libraries, Bulgarian style restaurants and pubs, Bulgarian folk dancing clubs, card playing clubs, a Bulgarian bank, a building society, etc. Most male informants pointed out the importance of the Bulgarian football team — "Maccabee"-Jafo — while female informants mentioned the Tsadikov Quire. As people said in the interviews, Jafo was synonymous with Bulgarian. Similar concentrations of Bulgarian Jews lived in the towns Ramle and Lud.

## PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS

The domains in which Bulgarian was used are rather limited. Its main function was and still is as a home language. Within the close community of the fifties and sixties it was used for socializing, wooing, love-making, dreaming, joke-telling and cursing.

Depending by the situation, Bulgarian was and still is used as secret language. Bulgarian speakers should be sure, that nobody of their situation surroundings do not knows Bulgarian and then they can communicate in Bulgarian.

Yet, the community language did not serve as an educational or professional medium and there was no family pressure to pass on the home language. Parents from the first generation, with a few exceptions, did not teach their children even to speak Bulgarian, to say nothing of reading and writing. So, as a result, the second generation mastered Hebrew much better and at the same time acquired, only through exposure some Bulgarian. This **imperfect learning** is the main cause for the substantial differences between the language spoken by the second generation and Modern Bulgarian. Another factor is the ever growing number of marriages between Jews of different origin, where Hebrew took over and became both the home and community language.

## ATTITUDES TO "CODE-SWITCHING AND CODE-MIXING"

A large part of the second generation fits the category of semi-speakers. They make use of the two systems at their disposal by emptying and switching. But they are very much aware of the negative attitudes or the stigma attached to that way of speaking. During the interviews they kept making remarks about their "Broken Bulgarian". They were perhaps assuming that we (the interviewers) as carriers of Modern Bulgarian would ridicule or would somehow be judgmental of their imperfect competence and were trying hard to make a good impression.

In the third generation the association with Hebrew is so strong that even if there are still opportunities to learn the parents' or grandparents' language, the motivation is totally missing. The loss or attrition of the language is inevitable.

The first generation we observed strict separation of domains. Questions about professional topics provoked a great deal of nonsense borrowing, especially of terminology, mixing, hesitation pauses, difficulty of recall. One elderly lady — an ex-social worker (Ruth Shafner), otherwise quite fluent, definitely refused to talk about her profession in Bulgarian, and switched to Hebrew. According to some authors, strict separation is a sign of stability. This stability, however, is evident only for the first generation. The interlanguage of the second generation is in a more fluid state.

Another pragmatic function readily observable as a motivation for "switching" might be labeled the "humiliating" or "Know your place" function. First generation speakers talking to new immigrants from Bulgaria would usually start the conversation in Hebrew, in which the new immigrant is most likely to be shaky and vulnerable and then having established their superiority would switch to Bulgarian to signal friendliness. Naturally that switch is not employed when addressing tourists from Bulgaria.

## EXAMPLES (ON HANDOUTS AND TRANSPARENCIES)

### (1) Reduction of polite form

The polite form of address 'VIE' in Bulgarian is reduced and hardly used at all under the combined influence of two factors: 1. The category does not exist in Hebrew, and 2. The interaction within the close community and in the home, made contacts

more casual, intimate and much less formal. The form is not even recognized by most second generation speakers as indicated by the example:

Interviewer: *Vie se zanimavate s tãrsene na izgubenite koreni. Taka li è?*

[*You (polite singular form) are searching for the lost roots, aren't you?*]

Respondent: *Da. Nie se zanimavame.* [*Yes, we are searching...*]

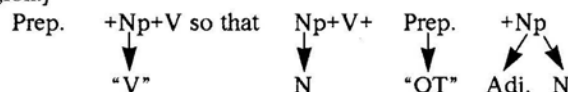
The polite form is not recognized at all. The answer is in the plural, although no other people are involved in the conversation.

## (2) Hebrew deep structures generating acceptable but cumbersome structures in Bulgarian.

Many of the utterances are heavily influenced by Hebrew deep structures and generate incorrect or sometimes grammatically correct but stylistically inappropriate or cumbersome structures:

*V hristijanskija svjat stana taka, ÷e hristijanството po÷na ot evrejskata religija...*

[*In the Christian world it happened so that Christianity started (or originated) from the Jewish religion.*]



## (3) Reduction of Aspectual Markers.

The rich gamut of the Bulgarian Tense and Aspect system of the Verb is heavily reduced, due to interference from Hebrew, which has no aspectual markers. The distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect is lost, aspect forming prefixes are dropped, as we can see from the following two examples:

(i) *Tourist guide:* (First generation speaker):

*\*Da vlizame (imperfective) da sedime (imperfective) v restoranta.*

[*Let's go and sit inside the restaurant*]

In (i) both verbs are used in the imperfective aspect which focuses on the repetitiveness and incompleteness of the action, while the appropriate verbal forms require the **Perfective Aspect**.

Correct form: *Da vlezem (Perfective) da sednem (Perfective)*

(ii) Interviewer: *Znaçi, toj iz÷ezna?*

[*So, he disappeared?*]

The prefix *iz-* is a marker for the Perfective Aspect. Respondent (Second generation speaker): *\*Ne, ne ÷ezna.* [*No, not disappear.*]

The dropping of the Perfective Aspect marker results in a wrong verbal form.

## (4) Loss of the Witness/Non-Witness distinction.

Bulgarian makes fine distinction (quite rarely observed in other languages) between the Witness and Non-Witness Aspect through morphological markers. That distinction seems to be completely lost. Tense forms which show that the speaker did not witness the event but got the information second-hand are avoided or not recognized, as indicate the examples:

(iii) *\*Tja kaza na sestra mi, ÷e mnogo iska da se sreštne s men.*

[*She told my sister that she'd like to meet me very much.*]

Only past tense forms are used — total loss of the non-witness aspect.

Correct form: Tja e **kazala** (Non-Witness form) *na sestra mi, če mnogo bi iskala*  
(modality marker) *da se srešne s men.*

(iv) \**Tam vidjah kăde se rodih.* (Past tense witness form) [*There I saw the house where I was born.*]

Correct form: *Tam vidjah kăde sam se bila' rodila.* (Non-Witness form)

**(5) Lexical borrowing in both directions.**

Lexical borrowing occurs frequently in both directions as examples show. Both languages are alternatively used as a **base** filled with lexical items from the other language, respectively.

(v) Bulgarian syntactic base with Hebrew lexical items: *Njama ni taam, ni rejah.* [*It has neither taste nor fragrance.*]

(vi) Hebrew syntactic base and preposed definite article with Bulgarian lexical items:  
*Ken, eifo ha-BAHAR, eifo ha-ČEREN PIPER?* [*Yes, where is the allspice, and where is the black pepper?*]

Both examples occurred in succession in the same conversation (overheard) between two ladies in the bus.